

# Presley O'Bannon Reincarnated

By Dick Culver

In the Spring of 1962, several of us from the 9<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment had been selected to represent the 9<sup>th</sup> Marines in the yearly Division Matches to be held at Camp Schwab on Okinawa. While there were some who enjoyed shooting in the Division Matches, in this case I was not an overly happy camper. I was the XO of Golf Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines and we were currently deployed to ensure that the bad guys didn't attempt to make the world safe for Communism. It was our job to supply a continually floating battalion (they were rotated on a continuing basis at the time from both the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiments) as deterrent or holding force to allow the entire 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division to "Land the Landing Force" to contain the latest threat from becoming a reality to impose "collectivism" on the free world. The task fell mainly to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division (with a Brigade stationed in Hawaii consisting of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regiment with appropriate reinforcements), and our air assets stationed in Japan consisting of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Air Wing. While there was very little chance of our being deployed in an armed intervention, still the offhand chance offered a bit of vicarious taste of adrenaline. I was not terribly thrilled at having to shoot at paper targets when the possibility of moving "commies" danced in our heads. Ah well, you do the job assigned and as our senior representative left on the Rock, I was also the guy who took care of occurrences that called for immediate attention for those left in the rear with the gear. I was a bit jealous of those floating around in the environs of possible danger while I was stuck on Okinawa, albeit for sharpening my skills and abilities designed to cancel enemy birth certificates! I took every opportunity to vent my frustrations on the center of the targets! Grrrrr...



**1<sup>st</sup>. Lt. Presley  
O'Bannon  
USMC  
1775 – 1850  
Hero of Derne, Tripoli**

Since our permanent digs were at the newly opened Camp Hansen, we were required to drive every morning to Camp Schwab, a far piece to the North where the matches were being conducted. As usual, the first round cracks downrange, as at any rifle range, at 0'dark thirty, and the drive took about 35 minutes if you ignored the speed limits and did marginally unsafe things to shorten the time on the road, you could expect to start firing at approximately 0600. Firing usually concluded at approximately 1400, necessitating a trip back to Camp Hansen to take care of the administrative details that tend to build up in direct proportion to your readiness to get in a couple of hours of rack time. By the time all the minor crisis(s) that had accumulated since the day before. One day, a lieutenant reported back from Subic Bay where the Battalion had dropped anchor to take care of some Battalion and personal business. He had a personal message and request to me from our commanding officer, Lt. Col. J. M. Jefferson, Jr. It seems the battalion was missing one 81mm Mortar Tube, to the tune of approximately \$1100 (the price carried on the books circa 1962).

Now Colonel Jefferson was a savvy character who had a handle on the Far East, being a Japanese linguist, and having served as a translator in Japan following WWII. To cut to the chase, Colonel Jefferson in an attempt to cement cordial and a good working relationship with the Navy crew on our shipping, had acceded to a request by the white hats to learn the

lashing and lowering techniques used to put the heavier infantry gear over the side of the ship into the Mike Boats. While such actions seemed reasonable over a second or third cup of Navy Joe in the Officer's Mess, the execution phase of this ill fated exercise ended in a mini-disaster. Alas, an 81mm Mortar tube had been improperly fitted (call it incompetent knot tying) with the appropriate half hitches and in the lowering operation the subject tube simply tumbled out of the lowering line heading straight to the bottom of Subic Bay. Unfortunately the Battalion didn't have any embarked SCUBA trained individuals and calling for some from the Navy UDT folks ashore would have been a bit embarrassing for both the Navy Ship's Detachment and 2/9. Now what?

Rightly or wrongly, I had acquired a reputation for being a relatively effect scrounge(r) and could usually come up with the desired item(s) if *legalese* did not enter into the equation. This is actually military theft, usually disguised under the cloak of operational necessity. While I did not exactly seek such a reputation, it was not totally unwarranted. I set my "brain housing group" to the unauthorized acquisition mode. Uppermost in my mind was my oldest truism, all such operations must have *plausible deniability*. Now the question was, where to start looking? Obviously I couldn't go scrounging a Marine Corps 81mm tube, as capture and conviction would be highly frowned upon, with "Portsmouth Time" not out of the question. Nope, I had to get the requested item from the Army. The Corps would be much more understanding, and might even give me a little cover under the right set of circumstances. Who in the hell would have stray 81 tubes laying around that might be pilferable?

With a little brain housing exercise, I decided that the only viable source might be the vast Army Supply Facility located just south of the Marine Base at Sukiran. The Army Supply depot was located in a place known as Machinado, the supply corps dream installation! I located my able co-conspirator in our Mighty Mite (a Helicopter transportable replacement for the Jeep). After the day's firing and return to Camp Hansen, we showered, and changed into starched utilities and spit shined boots with appropriately blocked utility covers. Since it was still in the rainy season and a bit nippy outside, we wore field jackets over our utilities thus covering the mandatory name tags sewn on our jackets – this was a major facet of the operation and went along with the plausible deniability routine. External anonymity was a major facet of the operation.

We drove around the myriad of huge and unmarked warehouses identified only by numbers stenciled on the exterior of each building. By asking around, we began to narrow our search. Some gent "thought" there were some 81's in building 12345 (fictitious number of course), and we started there. The sergeant sitting behind the desk said, no he didn't have any, but he thought that some were stored in building 13572 (or some such). After hitting about 12 different buildings (Machinado was [and I assume still is] a huge installation, mostly consisting of seemingly anonymous warehouses). At last we arrived at the most likely haven for stored 81mm tubes.

We went into a rather cavernous building with huge stacks of boxes stacked on either side of an isle formed by the contents. At the extreme end of the warehouse was a desk that appeared to be about a half mile in the distance. After a fair hike, we reached a rather bored appearing sergeant who appeared to be holding down the fort. The conversation went something like this:

"Sergeant, is this where I'm supposed to pick up the 81mm Mortar Tube?"

"Huh? What mortar tube, I dunno' about any mortar tubes to be picked up?"

Turning to my partner in crime, I came off on what I hoped passed for an appropriate temper tantrum concerning those who had sent us on a wild goose chase to pick up a tube without informing the appropriate personnel in the chain of command.

“Frank, gawd damn it, those miserable SOBs have done it to us again! Now we’ve got to drive all the way back to Schwab (using the wrong Camp of course) to straighten this damned thing out! \$hi+!”

A few more foul words were thrown in for effect, and Frank was the perfect foil for my ranting and ravings. A few ill considered foul utterances noting the necessity to have to personally go back and check with Colonel Erickson (a fictitious Colonel of course) would get this mess straitened out between the Army and Marine Corps hierarchy! I feigned a particularly foul mood, and made veiled promises of heads rolling over this screw up! The poor Army Sergeant had probably never heard such language from a couple of outraged officers, and was looking for a way to pour oil on troubled waters, thus preventing himself from getting caught in some sort of inter-service feud!

The young sergeant said “but sir, I have the tubes available, if I can get a signature for one, you can take it with you!”

Ah ha! Success, a somewhat browbeaten and cowed Army Supply type had offered the ultimate solution to our problem. Now if the lad had just not been educated in Marine Corps history, we were home free!

“Sergeant, no problem at all, I’ll be happy to sign for the tube! Your NCOs should be proud of you for your initiative. What’s your name? I want to send a complimentary note back to your unit noting your efficiency and cooperation! You have our thanks! Now if you will simply give us a piece of paper with your name, unit and Commanding Officer’s name, I’ll sign off one the tube and we’ll be on our way!”

An obviously thoroughly charmed young NCO gave us his name, rank and organization and had immediately fetched a brand new 81mm Mortar tube still in the original box. Our cup ranneth over... Hummm...

The young lad produced a receipt for the new mortar tube and indicated where I should sign to acknowledge custody of this piece of transferred ordnance. I checked all the blocks and dutifully signed the name of “Prestley N. O’Bannon” 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant, USMC in the designated location! The youngster never asked for any identification, nor questioned that the tube was to be delivered to 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment (safely stationed at Camp Pendleton of course). Frank and I shook the lad’s hand, thanked him for his courtesy and cooperation, loaded our contraband 81 tube in our Mighty Mite and headed back to Hansen. Hopefully Presley’s valiant efforts, as had his hand in conquering the town of Derne, Tripoli in 1805, helped secure a mortar tube that wreaked maximum havoc on the followers of Ho Chi Minh a few years in the future.

Culver’s crimes of course went undetected, although I’m sure Colonel Jefferson wondered where the pristine mortar tube had been procured. A truly successful Battalion Commander, if he is wise, does not ask questions to which he might not want precise answers. Colonel Jefferson was a wise man, and Culver’s luck held. An inquiry to HQMC would have revealed that the justly famous Presley O’Bannon had been safely buried in Pleasureville, Kentucky since 1850. His remains were later moved to Frankfort, Kentucky in 1920 by the Daughters of the American Revolution, and a monument raised in his honor,

although I suspect not for his efforts to acquire an 81mm Mortar tube for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Marines on Okinawa in 1962.

Any young Marine would have fallen out of his chair laughing if I had signed Presley's name to a memorandum receipt, as all Marines are taught in Boot Camp that Presley's exploits resulted in the American Flag being raised over foreign soil for the first time in 1805. O'Bannon was presented a sword with a Mameluke Hilt following the battle that has become the official Marine Officers sword. ...And then of course there are the lines from the Marine's Hymn that indicate great deeds from "The Halls of Montezuma, to the Shores of Tripoli"!

I hope Presley continues to rest well in Valhalla and realizes that in some small way, he helped arm the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment with a new Mortar Tube in the continual quest for honor and glory of the Corps while subduing a few stray Communist hoards in the environs of former French Indo China...

Semper Fi,

**Dick**